

Karen Hesse

By Jamie Kee

Karen Hesse, born August 29, 1952, is an American author who writes literature for children and young adults. Her literary works often contain historical settings. Growing up, Hesse had many dreams. She imagined herself as being an archaeologist, an ambassador, an actor, and an author. Even though she gave up on most of these ideas, she always aspired to be a published writer. Hesse eventually reached this desire, but it took her more than thirty years to do so.

Hesse was born in Baltimore, Maryland. From the age of ten, she considered herself "good with words," and she exhibited a writing talent early on. It was Hesse's fifth grade teacher who supported her, convincing Hesse that she could be a professional writer some day. Her teacher's confidence made an impact on Hesse, giving her the self-confidence she needed.

After high school, Hesse had plans to attend college. She also held many jobs in her life, some prior to college completion and others following it. She worked as a waitress, a nanny, a personnel officer, a librarian, an agricultural laborer, an advertising secretary, a typesetter, a proofreader, a mental-health-care worker, a substitute teacher, and a book reviewer. Hesse decided to attend Towson State College, majoring in theater. After two semesters, she transferred to the University of Maryland. Hesse eventually earned a Bachelor's degree with a major in English and a double minor in Psychology and Anthropology. During this time in her life, prior to completing her studies, she also got married. After graduating from college, Hesse and her husband moved to Brattleboro, Vermont, and eventually had two children.



Prior to writing a book, Hesse follows a strategic plan. She first immerses herself in research surrounding her storyline. She studies relevant literature, music, artwork, and pictures. She typically reads thousands of pages from books in preparation for her next project. Hesse also plans her characters well, which is evident after reading just a few of her works. Hesse, who is known for writing historical fiction, has a wide range of characters. She has written about such characters as Mila, a girl who raised dolphins; and Nicholas, a stowaway on Captain Cook's ship. She published her first book, *Wish on a Unicorn*, in 1991. This book is about a girl who found an old stuffed unicorn and discovered that it caused little wishes to come true. The heart of the story, however, is the character's realization about the importance of family. Another of Hesse's books, *Letters From Rifka* (1992) is about a young girl's journey from a Jewish community in the Ukraine to Ellis Island and the many difficulties she encounters.

Hesse wrote several books in 1993, with one being coauthored. Between 1994 and 1997 Hesse wrote five additional books. One of the books, *Out of the Dust* (1997), earned her the 1998 Newbery Medal and the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction. *Out of the Dust*, an historical fiction novel about the Dust Bowl, is written in free verse and is told from the viewpoint of the character Billie Jo. Interestingly enough, the "seeds" for *Out of the Dust* grew out of a picture book idea. Hesse had written an early draft for a future picture book, *Come On, Rain* (1999). Her writers' group had insisted that she explain more about why the character in the book wanted rain. That's when *Out of the Dust* came to Hesse's mind.

Hesse received other recognitions for her writing besides her Newbery Award and Scott O'Dell Award. In 2002 Hesse was a recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship. In 2006 she received the Kerlan Award for her contributions of original manuscripts and writing to the Children's Literature Research Collection at the University of Minnesota.

During her career, Karen Hesse has tackled some very difficult subjects. Her 2001 historical fiction novel, *Witness*, is the story of the Klu Klux Klan's attempts at taking over a small town in 1924 Vermont with the purpose of recruitment. In a unique manner, Hesse wrote the book through the voices of many different characters. Another difficult subject explored in Hesse's 2004 novel, *The Cats of Krasinski Square*, tells the story of life in the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II.



Karen Hesse considers young readers to be "the most challenging, demanding, and rewarding of audiences." When asked why she writes for young readers, Hesse always replies, "I can't think of anyone I'd rather write for." Hesse truly enjoys her job. She has stated that she loves writing and can't wait to start work on her keyboard each day. She also enjoys reading, traveling, hiking, music, and time with family and friends. Karen Hesse currently lives with her family in Vermont and continues to write from her attic office surrounded by books, her favorite artwork, and a comfortable place to read.

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Questions

- _____ 1. Which of the following awards or recognition did Hesse NOT receive?
- A. Newbery Award
 - B. Scott O'Dell Award
 - C. MacArthur Fellowship
 - D. She received all of the above.
- _____ 2. Who first supported Hesse's writing and believed she would be a professional writer?
- A. her father
 - B. her first year college professor
 - C. her 5th grade teacher
 - D. her husband
- _____ 3. Which of Hesse's writings focus on the impact of the Klu Klux Klan in a small town?
- A. *Witness*
 - B. *Out of the Dust*
 - C. *Letters From Rifka*
 - D. *The Cats of Krasinski Square*
- _____ 4. Which word would Hesse NOT use to describe writing for a young audience?
- A. stimulating
 - B. satisfying
 - C. pointless
 - D. difficult
- _____ 5. How long did it take Hesse to reach her dream of writing and publishing?
- A. over forty years
 - B. three years
 - C. over thirty years
 - D. ten years
- _____ 6. Which of Hesse's books is about a young girl's difficulties moving from a Jewish community in the Ukraine to Ellis Island?
- A. *The Cats of Krasinski Square*
 - B. *Wish on a Unicorn*
 - C. *Out of the Dust*
 - D. *Letters From Rifka*

Name _____



Date _____

- _____ 7. What type of settings does Hesse often use?
- A. romantic
 - B. historical
 - C. fantasy
 - D. futuristic

8. What does Hesse do before writing a book?

If you were going to write a novel, what kind would you write? Who would be your audience? What would your setting be? Write an essay discussing all the details of your novel along with an explanation of your choices.

Write your own short story with an historical setting.
